The Telegraph

SATURDAY 6 SEPTEMBER 2025 VOL. XLIV NO. 61

FRESH LESSONS

Traditionally, students and former students express their respect for teachers on Teachers' Day. Sadly, that respect has become scarce in many cases nowadays: teachers, and therefore education itself, have somehow lost their value. Teachers have become associated with tuition rackets and cupidity, with financial corruption and closeness with local politicians, especially in the suburban areas. Political intervention in education at different levels has worsened the situation. The School Service Commission recruitment scandal in West Bengal is an overt symptom of the rot in the system. The term being used — "tainted candidates" — is a shameful appellation for those aspiring to become teachers. Teachers' values are being questioned where suicides by students are exposing their ineffectuality or inaction, or where political or social discrimination within the student community is not being seriously dealt with. Are these teachers laying the foundations for a progressive, open-minded education or building up moral and ethical standards among students who will become citizens of a flourishing democracy?

> A way back to respect for teachers and their dedication to their calling has to be found

Yet this is not the whole story. Numerous teachers, some nameless, are struggling in different corners of the country to teach children and help underprivileged students. Some teach street children, some slum children and those wandering about in stations, concentrating not just on lessons but on hygiene and nutrition as well. Their idealism, dedication and patience deserve the greatest respect for they make teaching a truly noble profession. Some are students themselves, like the 12-year-old Bharti Kumari, who goes to school but teaches underprivileged children under a mango tree. Babar Ali of West Bengal started at the age of 16 and today, at 29, he and 10 others teach 800 underprivileged children. Teacher heroes emerged during the Covid years, like Sunil Kumar, who organised community classes for children without the resources to attend online classes, or teachers who turned streets into blackboards. Some retired teachers continue teaching at the lowest possible cost, while a teacher like Abdul Malik swims a nine-kilometre river every day to reach his students. Some teachers create stimulating learning environments with innovative new tools, like Arvind Gupta, who converts trash to toys, or like makers of other low-cost teaching aids. Sandeep Desai even begged on the streets to establish his school to teach poor children in Rajasthan and Maharashtra.

Acknowledging the quiet struggle and the patience of numberless teachers still unknown may be a way of finding the route back to the respect and the admiration that teachers should evoke. There should be more awareness about these individuals, nameless or named, for they are the true role models who hold up the values of learning and teaching, who create moral and ethical standards and show students the way towards social and moral responsibility. There is no doubt that a way has to be found back to love and respect teachers, for devaluing teachers and education is deeply damaging. Sacrifice, dedication, patience, creativity and learning all exist; the challenge is to restore them to their rightful place in awareness.